

Walid Raad

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Walid Raad, *Footnote II*, 2015, wallpaper, ink-jet prints, cast-urethane resin, paint. Installation view. Photo: Thomas Griesel.

WALID RAAD'S PROJECT *Scratching on things I could disavow*, 2007–, puts the artist's docufictional sensibility into the service of a distinctive brand of institutional critique. As he puts it, with telling scare quotes, in the artist's statement accompanying his current retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, *Scratching* investigates "the history of art in the 'Arab world'" and the recent proliferation of "new cultural foundations, art galleries, art schools, art magazines, art prizes, art fairs, and large Western-brand and local museums" across the region. "These material developments," he continues, "were matched by equally fraught efforts to define, sort, and stitch 'Arab art' along three loosely silhouetted nodes: 'Islamic,' 'modern,' and 'contemporary.'"

Raad's project resonates strongly with—and feeds off of—the challenges and opportunities that confront everyone invested in the field of art history commonly known as “Islamic art.” A growing number of doctoral candidates wish to study modern and contemporary Islamic art, while museums increasingly collect and exhibit work from these periods. These developments followed a concerted effort within the academy, intensifying since the late 1990s, to critically reevaluate Islamic art's own historiography, especially with regard to collection and museum formation and modes of display. Even as the field was engaged in methodical self-criticism, however, it was responding to fast-paced and largely market-driven developments in the art world—a dynamic that exemplified tensions within the broader, discipline-wide effort to construct a truly global art history. In institutional and market contexts, the desire to cultivate new donors and monetize interest in art from the Islamic world has abetted a certain ahistorical tendency. This has been most visible in museum exhibitions where the messiness of jerry-rigged formulations and a dearth of archival research have led to crude responses to complex issues. In seeking to make art out of these multifaceted circumstances, Raad has wisely avoided the reductive scheme he describes, in which “Arab art” is divided into three categories: Islamic, modern, and contemporary. And while his work might investigate subjects or themes pertaining to the Middle East, it never privileges his own national, ethnic, or religious identity, nor does it ground its authority in older forms of regional artistic production (a popular tactic that generally mobilizes problematic notions of authenticity in the production of a “modern-traditional” style).

Raad's exhibition at MoMA is installed across the second and third floors, and while the lion's share of space is devoted to *Scratching*, the artist's well-known project the Atlas Group (which he began in 1989 and which is ongoing, despite the officially stated terminus of 2004) is surveyed in its own gallery. Visitors will see many affinities between the two bodies of work. Both comprise ever-expanding, intricately interconnected arrays of photographs, videos, and objects, organized into installations and activated through Raad's occasional performances. Both oscillate between fact and fiction in a cycle of avowal and disavowal, affirmation and negation, assertion and prevarication. And in both the Atlas Group and *Scratching*, Raad establishes a nonlinear, even involuted temporality. He tends to group works within works and series within series; the titles he assigns these elements often contain numbers that suggest a particular progression but are, as far as can be determined, arbitrary. Within this disorienting nested structure, it is impossible to determine a chronological sequence of production. This feature defies teleological ordering. It also establishes a condition of being perpetually in medias res—an insistent open-endedness that allows for a theoretically infinite set of interventions, revisions, redirections, and discoveries for the project en bloc.

Such potential mutability is illustrated clearly in *Scratching*, for example by *Appendix XVIII: Plate 101_A History of Indices*, 2009. Featured on the cover of the catalogue, the work is an ink-jet print of a peculiar text—a kind of sparse,

polyglot index that appears to have been composed by someone whose grasp of the alphabet is tentative at best. The abundance of empty space suggests, if not a blank slate, a field of future activity. The title *Appendix XVIII* is applied to a number of other prints in *Scratching*, while other titles (*Preface*, *Acknowledgement*, *Footnote*, etc.) similarly suggest that these works are fragments of a vast exploded book or library. Such repetitions and variations underscore not only the protean nature of Raad's process but also the instability of knowledge and the fallibility of ostensibly authoritative sources and systems—such epistemological unreliability being a major preoccupation of his work. *Scratching* stages this uncertainty as a kind of flux, exploring the effects of movement—whether cultural, linguistic, or physical—on techniques of curation and museology and on assumptions about contexts and habits of reception. Any claim to knowledge based on conventional art-historical study or empiricism is thwarted.

Perhaps the key distinction between the Atlas Group and *Scratching* is that in the former work, the rational processes of historicist thinking hold sway (albeit only to be continually contested), while in the latter, the default register is oneiric irrationality. Historical causality fades away entirely; past events are recovered and organized via the associative, subjective logic of dreams and memory; affect replaces detachment. The project is divided into two parts: *Les Louvres*, 2007–, and *Walkthrough*, 2007–. The fictional—one might say magical-realist—conceit of *Les Louvres* is that, in 2013, three hundred objects owned by the titular museum's Département des Arts de l'Islam were sent to Louvre Abu Dhabi. But when the crates arrived at their destination, the unpacked objects manifested a series of unexpected mutations. Raad, we learn, was permitted to conduct "aesthetic experiments" on these treasures. Eventually, he concluded that each object that emerged from the crates was actually "a composite of at least two" of the shipped items and "that the objects had in fact traded skins with each other, and that the skin trade resulted in shadow-less objects." He informs us that the shadows did eventually return—but only after he had mounted the objects on walls and supplied them with painted shadows.

Raad's experiments are re-created in *Preface to the third edition_Acknowledgement*, 2014–15, one of two interrelated groupings within *Les Louvres*. In this installation, five "composite" objects are hung on gray and brown walls in a square room. In each composite, the substance of one object is conflated with the silhouette of another. For example, in *Panneau*, 2014–15, a carved panel conforms to the shape of a sword, while in *Element II*, 2014–15, the outlines of a luster-glazed tile suggest an oil lamp. The five "composites" are brightly lit to cast real shadows, sometimes doubled, while fictive painted shadows are "cast" in directions that often run against actual light sources. These fused objects, melding mediums, regions, periods, operate against the grain of received histories of Islamic art, while the intermingling of real and painted shadows suggests, among other things, the double life of objects as material things and archival presences.

More composite artifacts crop up in *Footnote I*, *Footnote II*, *Footnote III*, all 2015, the other grouping of works within *Les Louvres*. Here, they appear both as 3-D-printed sculptures and in ink-jet prints. These items are shown against a trio of large panels, each featuring a chaotic, nonperspectival photomontage of tumbling, overlapping, and interpenetrating museum cases of the sort used in early displays of Islamic art at the Louvre. Additional framed elements—sketchy diagrams that suggest spatial configurations but defy comprehension—are suspended on the wall.

Walkthrough, the second corpus within *Scratching*, is an installation divided into six zones by distinct floor coverings—concrete, wood, carpet, etc.—to simulate changing institutional contexts. This spatialization is emphasized by shifting display styles and lighting, the latter modulated dramatically by Raad during his performances. Each part, we discover, was created in response to an actual or imaginary event in the past, present, or future—temporal registers that are often reversed, conflated, or elided. For example, Raad relates that one of the parts, *Translator's introduction: Pension arts in Dubai*, 2012, was catalyzed in November 2007, when he received an invitation to join the Artist Pension Trust, an investment and pension fund that derives its value from works by member artists. After extensive research and a meeting with APT founder Moti Shniberg, Raad decided not to join, but presents his findings in a tableau of text, newspaper clippings, drawings, photographs, and colored digital projections. This mélange resembles a massive flowchart tracking the movement of capital among individuals, institutions, corporations, and esoteric financial instruments, especially in the UAE. In its hectic visuality, rendered all the more confusing by oscillating light and visitors' shadows, it suggests that the kind of at least semi-intelligible networks delineated by Hans Haacke no longer have any purchase on the carnivalesque chaos of our moment.

Another of *Walkthrough's* six components, *Section 88_ACT XXXI: Views from outer to inner compartments*, 2015, meditates not on the tangled networks of the present but on the *longue durée* of European cultural hegemony, here represented by linear perspective. Its premise is a parable about an event transpiring somewhere between 2014 and 2024: A “proud local resident” in an unnamed locale goes to the “opening of a new museum of modern and/or contemporary art,” but flees without entering, because he “feels that were he to walk in, he would certainly ‘hit a wall.’” The work's physical manifestation is a mocked-up gallery interior in which shallow sculptural relief and digital projections create the illusion of spatial depth. Viewers who try to enter this depthless museal space find themselves in the position of the stymied local resident. *Section I 39: The Atlas Group (1989–2004)* also features a gallery that cannot be entered; although, in this case, it's because it has been miniaturized: A maquette of the type used by curators is on display, and visitors are told that this model was built to house some of Raad's Atlas Group works after the objects mysteriously shrank during shipment to a Beirut gallery.

In the other three works in the series, too, we find the devices that figure

indeterminacy throughout *Scratching*: optical instability (“lost” reflections), textual ambiguity (Lebanese painters’ names in white relief on white grounds), fabulism (telepathic communication), etc. Ultimately, what is at stake in *Walkthrough* is a diachrony—specifically, a history of artists of the Islamic lands, past, present, and future. Raad chronicles a canonical formation of artists, styles, and movements, as yet in the making. All sorts of processes—financial, social, political—interfere with and interrupt the realization of this history, and even cast its temporality in doubt. For in Raad’s magical-realist world, which so closely resembles our own, the axis of diachrony is continually knotting itself into synchronic sprawls, such that the present is both haunted by futurity and continually harried by various and conflicting pasts, each insistently demanding to be written.

Compelling as this work is in certain respects, I was left wondering about some of Raad’s choices and intentions in *Scratching*. The new art economy and the formation of art histories in the Islamic lands are important topics, and they obviously raise a host of intellectual and ethical issues. However, any criticism or political commentary in *Scratching* is delivered with a soft touch. Raad’s performances, in which he plays a docent or curator, are more pointed, more forthright in their critique, but this is not the context in which the vast majority of viewers will experience the works. And rather than elucidating the various political, economic, and social structures within which art and culture are enmeshed, so as to render those structures legible and transparent, the work equivocates so insistently that it finally seems coy. While the Atlas Group deals quite directly with Lebanon’s civil war, in *Scratching*, Raad’s approach to the various conflicts in the region, inspired by ideas of withdrawal and evacuation theorized by Lebanese philosopher Jalal Toufic, is highly allusive. In their respective catalogue essays, curator Eva Respini describes the work as “slippery” and “mysterious,” while historian Finbarr Barry Flood styles it a “poetics.” Perhaps, but despite its abundance of material, annotation, didactic captions, and pamphlets, *Scratching* not only refuses closure but perhaps proposes a kind of futility in its recycling of visitors through circuits of analysis, deduction, interpretation.

But we should have been forewarned. The title of the project itself suggests several layers of resignation to the status quo. While scratching might cause irritation (or give some relief), it could also be taken as something registered only on the surface: skin-deep, incapable of structural impact. And what of the positions Raad takes on the issues he explores, to the extent that they can be known? These are things that the artist can easily disavow, refuse, reject, etc. He might accept invitations that he previously refused, or he might deny his very authorship of his entire oeuvre someday. Until then, I prophesy that an Emirati man wearing a portable, personal air-conditioning suit expects to see more *Acknowledgements*, *Prefaces*, and *Chapters* one hundred years in the future.

“Valid Raad” is on view through Jan. 31; travels to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Feb. 24–May 30; Museo Jumex, Mexico City, Oct. 13, 2016–Jan. 14, 2017.